HOW ARE WE TO BELIEVE THIS?
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Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24
1 Corinthians 15:50-58
John 20:1-18

"Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord.'"
John 20:18

Dear God, as frightened disciples came to the tomb in the early hours of Sunday morning, so we have come here today with our fears, our worries, our concerns for the world this morning. We come with our doubts, our occasional cynicism, but also our love and our hopes. As you came to the disciples, startle us with your love and your life and your truth, and open our hearts to the good glad news of love more powerful than death; in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen

Preachers love this day for lots of reasons, chief among them the wonderful fact that our churches are full.

The only people happier than preachers on Easter are the florists. This is, as they say, the "Big One."

A distinguished teacher of preaching used to like to remind his students that on Easter, contrary to what they might prefer to think, all those people are not necessarily there to hear the preacher. And, with tongue in cheek, he went on to say that because many of those people the preacher is facing on Easter haven't been to church since last Easter, they're expecting to be scolded, will be a little disappointed, in fact, if you don't scold them a little, remind them this activity happens every Sunday, all year long, 52 times a year, make them feel a little uncomfortable.

Not this preacher. I'm glad you're here today. If you only come to church once a year—this is the Sunday to do it. The flowers are gorgeous, the music is wonderful, everybody looks beautiful—and this is the day when we ponder and affirm and claim what it is that compels us to call ourselves Christian.

So I won't scold you or make you feel guilty—but we will, in fact, be here again next Sunday, and you are all invited back. Which brings me to a new dimension of this new Co-Pastor arrangement.

We both can't preach the "Big Ones." We decided early on not to subject you to two Easter services. And so for the first time in her distinguished ministry, Joanna Adams is not preaching on Easter Sunday. And for the first time in my experience, I didn't preach Palm Sunday.

Next Sunday, the first Sunday in Eastertide, she will be preaching, and I have an idea you'll hear Joanna's Easter sermon or a variation on the theme—which is another very good reason to come back next week.

In my memory and experience, Easter never quite rose to the level of Christmas, never even approached the sheer festivity and joy of Christmas, and not only because of the gift-factor. Easter had its fun too, although it was pretty modest—coloring eggs at the kitchen table on Saturday afternoon, eggs that would mysteriously show up the next morning in an Easter basket full of items much more attractive than hardboiled eggs actually: chocolate-covered eggs with coconut filling, chocolate eggs wrapped in foil, chocolate eggs with icing decorations, and in the middle, surrounded by artificial straw, a larger, sometimes full of coconut, sometimes solid, sometimes hollow, rabbit. And then off to church, always with something new to wear: in simpler times, more modest times, a new necktie, perhaps, or a shirt, or shoes, and on one occasion, my first real suit for Easter.

But all in all, it never even approached Christmas. I confess I always had trouble with the Easter Bunny. Santa Claus, after all, makes a kind of sense: a jolly, kindly old man who somehow manages to deliver presents to all the children on Christmas Eve and morning by way of a sleigh and flying reindeer. It pushes the envelope of credulity to be sure. But there is just enough plausibility there to sustain it for 7 or 8 or 10 years. But the Easter Bunny? I had a lot of trouble with him from the start. Maybe it was the eggs. It seemed like a lot of trouble just for eggs. I didn't particularly like hardboiled eggs back then. I was a skeptic about the whole business. (See Eugene Petersen in *Journal for Preachers*, Easter 2002.)

And I now conclude that it is not unrelated to what Easter is about. Easter is about something that is unbelievable, something that assaults our common sense. I can understand God's love expressed in the birth of a child, God coming to us in that birth. But that a young man, who was quite dead didn't stay dead—that is impossible, that makes no sense whatsoever. Things like that don't happen in this world.

Just how we are we to believe this? I was delighted to discover a little vignette in William Placher's treatment of the resurrection in his new book, *Jesus the Savior.* A cynical eighteenth-century German historian Herman Samuel Reimarus wrote, "The disciples discovered that there was a better living to be made preaching than in fishing. Therefore, when Jesus died, they invented the story of his resurrection to keep themselves in their new, more lucrative line of business" (p. 166). What the good professor forgot to mention was that their "lucrative line of work" not only wasn't very lucrative, it was far more dangerous than fishing. Most of them died as a result of it. One would think that perhaps at the last moment, just before the execution began, they might have said something like, "OK, OK, it isn't true. You're right. We made it up."

In any event, from the start there is skepticism about resurrection in the stories themselves.

There is a resistance to believing this in the earliest accounts.

They are precious gifts, the four separate stories of Easter are; they tell four different stories, different characters, different sequences of events. There is a monumental amount of coming and going, running back and forth, weeping and shouting, total confusion. The fact that you cannot combine the four different accounts in the four Gospels into one tale is the first evidence, it seems to me, that there is something going on here that transcends the normal rational way our intellect receives and processes new information. The one consistency in the Easter stories is the sense of surprise—no one expects this, apparently—and the subsequent resistance to belief on the part of everyone involved.

Jesus' dear and close friend Mary Magdalene, in John's account, is the first. On Friday he died. No one disputes that. Even the most cynical historians find no reason to doubt that one Jesus of Nazareth, a teacher and healer of some notoriety, made the mistake of leaving his native Galilee to come to the capital city of Jerusalem for the Passover and five days later was put to death by the Romans as a threat to Roman authority and public order. That was on Friday. He was buried before sundown. Then came the Sabbath, quiet Saturday. At sunrise Sunday, the first day of the week, Mary came to the tomb and to her shock and dismay discovered that the large stone covering the opening had been rolled back. Did you notice what she did then? She didn't start singing Easter hymns. The possibility of a resurrection never occurred to her apparently. She ran back to the where her friends were hiding and told them that someone had stolen the body. Two of them, Peter and John, then went to check it out. They saw the stone rolled back. They stepped in and had a look. Peter first, then John. No body. And they didn't break into hymns of joy either. The writer says, "They returned to their homes."

Mary, in the meantime, had returned to the empty tomb. She's distraught. Her beloved is not only dead but now, in death, the victim of continuing humiliation. She can't even give him a decent burial.

And then things start spinning out of control. Two men, John calls them angels, which means messengers, ask why she is weeping. Another man shows up and she turns around, looks right at him, and reasonably concludes that he's the gardener and asks him what he has done with the body. And then the man says her name, "Mary." And with that, she recognizes him. It is the story of reluctant belief, intellectual resistance.

Emily Dickinson once wrote, "Truth must dazzle gradually, or every man be blind."

Professor Eugene Peterson comments: "Participation in resurrection cannot be forced or engineered. . . . Recognitions and confessions were not forced. Jesus did not use his resurrection presence to bully people into worship or discipleship (*Journal for Preachers*, p. 15).

We Western Christians always try to put our religion in rational theological arguments and carefully worded creeds to recite in church and sometimes to verify orthodox belief—but this is not about believing a doctrine. This is about encountering a reality that transcends normal intellectual categories and common sense. This is about a truth larger than philosophic theses, theological proposals, confessions, or creeds. This is about trusting something you can't prove.

When Mary returned to her friends a second time, she put the Easter claim as simply and elegantly as it has ever been put: "I have seen the Lord."

There is a great line in a popular song written by Bono, a rock star, who not only is enormously popular but enormously influential. He was the star of the half-time show at the Super Bowl and also appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine as a result of his concern about international debt and world hunger and his successful campaign to get our president's attention to these problems. And no, I didn't find this myself. A friend pointed it out to me. And then she produced the CD and the words that Bono wrote:

> And if the darkness is to keep us apart
> And if the daylight feels like it's a long way off . . .
> And if your glass heart should crack
> And for a second you turn back
> Oh no, be strong
> Walk on, walk on
> You're packing a suitcase for a place none of us have been
> A place that has to be believed to be seen.
> ("Walk On," from *All That You Can't Leave Behind,* U2; pointed out by Eva Stinson of *Presbyterians Today*)

What a curious thing to say: "A place that has to be believed to be seen"? It's ordinarily the other way around, isn't it? Seeing is believing. You see it first, then believe. But Bono, and the Gospel writers and people of faith down through the ages, know that you trust, you give your heart to—which is what credo means—you invest your soul, your love, your passion, your hope, and then maybe you see. The truth is gradually given, Emily Dickinson said.

You cannot prove this claim. You can't always see it, but Easter means that we are living in a new world where hope is always present regardless of what is going on, where love is more powerful than hate, where life overcomes death.

In the meantime, death is pretty real and very powerful. The tragic counterpart of suicide bombings and military response is cascading out of control in Israel and Palestine. The death of Jesus 2000 years ago brought to a tragic and terribly final end his disciples' growing conviction that he was the Messiah, God's true Son, and with that their hopes that God's kingdom was coming, and with that death the end of the possibility that he was right; that love is better than hate; that it is better to give than to receive; that peacemakers are blessed and little children are always signs of the kingdom; that excluded are included in God's hospitality; that the lame, weak, blind, and crippled are whole in God's sight; that you are living your life to its best and fullest and happiest when you are actually giving it away. All of that died, too. All of that, shown for what it is, naïve nonsense, when he died.

Death is what's real and powerful in this world. Alan Lewis was a fine theologian who taught at Austin Theological Seminary. He was working on his life's project, a major textbook he called *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday,* when he was, in his own words,

"interrupted, by a long, disabling Sabbath, a tumorous malignancy that was removed and recurred; the removal of lung, the exquisite ambiguity of radiation therapy." For a year, Lewis and his physician fought the disease, and when he was able to return to his work, he reflected on how very much our culture works at denying the reality and power of death, how we "ground our lifestyles in the illusion of limitlessness," and how a battle with an ultimately terminal illness is a lesson in mortality and limits learned in a hospital bed what he called the "vulnerability of the horizontal." It's a lesson we need to learn to be fully human, he wrote. Lewis wrote the most exquisite and lovely sentence: "There is a superfluidity of beauty in real flowers, not in spite of, but because of their fragility and flimsiness, beyond that of the most convincing but unwilting plastic imitations" (p. 414).

And then the cancer returned and he died at the age of 50. His colleagues completed his strong and good book and before he died he wrote: "Central to the good news in the Christian three-day story is the demonstration that death does not have the last word upon human destiny, that God sets limits to death, and to death's power to oppress and limit human life."

Time was when the preacher wanted more than anything to marshal an airtight argument that would prove it. Professor Peterson remembers the preacher on Easter Sunday launching 13 incontrovertible proofs that Jesus rose from the dead, proofs with which "we could wrestle unbelievers to the ground." Mostly Peterson remembers that it took the preacher an hour and a half to do it, by which time nobody much cared anymore. It exceeds our reason, this truth does. It addresses our hearts and spirits—as well as our minds. It calls to our hopes, our aspirations, our passions, as well as our reason and common sense.

And so we turn to the artists, the musicians, the great hymns that carry our spirits to new places this day, and to the poets.

To John Donne's "Holy Sonnets":

> Death be not proud, though some have called thee
> Mighty and dreadful, for thou are not so. . . .
> Why swell'st thou then?
> One short sleep past, we wake eternally,
> And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.

To Wendell Barry, Kentucky farmer-poet, slogging around in the woods on the Sabbath instead of going to church, observing the profound cycle of death and resurrection in nature and going back to his desk to write:

> Here nothing grieves
> In the risen season. Past life
> Lives in the living. Resurrection
> Is the way each maple leaf
> Commemorates its kind . . .
> What rises

Rises into comprehension
And beyond. (*Sabbaths,* pp. 7-8)

And Bono, of course:

You're packing a suitcase for a place
none of us has been
A place that has to be believed to be seen.

My favorite part of the Easter story comes at the end. "Don't hold on to me," he said to Mary, when she apparently tried to verify the experience. "Don't hold on to me," he said, which means, I think, "Regardless of how you try to understand and explain this, regardless of all the wonderfully bizarre ways you will try to celebrate this down across the years (the eggs and flowers and Easter bonnets), I am always ahead of you, out in front of you in the future. I will be there in your future. And therefore there is no tragedy so great that I cannot in some way redeem it, and there is no personal loss so profound that I cannot overcome it, and there is no pain so deep that I cannot bear it with you, and there is no cause so hopeless that I cannot fill it and you with new energy and hope and passion and life."

No tragedy—even what happened to us last September 11, the memory of which will never go away—no tragedy the risen Christ cannot redeem.

No loss—our dearest ones—that the risen Christ cannot overcome.

No cause—even that most illusive dream of peace in the world, in Israel and Palestine, in Afghanistan and Iraq, in Somalia, and in Northern Ireland—no cause so hopeless that the risen Christ cannot energize it and us as we devote ourselves to him and his kingdom on earth.

And so may the blessings of the day be yours.

May you know, in your heart and soul and mind—mostly in your heart—that you live in a new world now, and that while death is powerful, there is a love more powerful still; that when things are not right, as Joanna Adams said last Sunday, God has put something very right. May you, because of this day the Lord hath surely made, trust him with all your days and love him with all you heart and follow him with all your might.

And at the end of the day, may you hear him call your name.

We will see the Lord. Christ is risen. Thanks be to God.

Amen.